

The Other Daughter

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headline

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1

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Prologue

September 1977
Huntsville, Texas

At six A.M. the Huntsville ‘Walls’ Unit went to full lockdown.

Outside the redbrick walls, protesters were already gathering for Texas’s first execution in thirteen years. Inhumane, picket signs read. Cruel and unusual. The ‘Texas thunderbolt’ should never have been brought out of retirement. The death penalty was capricious and irresponsible.

An equal-sized crowd begged to differ. Cruel and unusual was still too good for Russell Lee Holmes. Send him to the chair. Let him fry. Execution candidate number 362 was worth bringing back the electric chair – in fact, they should bring back hanging.

Inside the Death House, where he’d been brought just the night before, Russell Lee Holmes settled his sparse frame more comfortably on the lone bunk in his cell and ignored them all. He had watery blue eyes, a thin face, and a hunched, lean frame. After thirty years of chewing tobacco and drinking soda, his teeth were crooked, stained, and half-rotted. He liked to pick them with his thumbnail. He definitely wasn’t a pleasant man or a brilliant man. What he was was quiet and, for the most part, indifferent. Sometimes it was difficult to remember just

what his small, finely boned hands had done.

In January, when Utah had ended the Supreme Court's moratorium on executions by throwing Gilmore in front of the firing squad, there hadn't been any doubt that Texas would reenter the death business. And there hadn't been any doubt that Russell Lee Holmes would be the first man up to bat.

Maybe that's because when the sentencing judge had asked him what he had to say about kidnapping, torturing, and murdering six small children, Russell Lee had said, 'Well, sir, basically, I can't wait to get me another.'

The warden arrived at Russell Lee's cell. He was a fat, barrel-chested man, nicknamed Warden Cluck due to jowls that reddened and shook like a rooster's when he was angry or upset. Russell Lee knew from experience that it didn't take much to get Cluck upset. Now, however, the warden seemed kind, even benevolent, as he unrolled the warrant and cleared his throat so the other four men in the Death House could hear.

'Here's your sentence, Russell Lee. I'm gonna read to you your sentence. You listenin'?'

'They're gonna fry my ass,' he said casually.

'Now, Russell Lee, we're all here to help you today. To get you through this with less fuss.'

'Go to hell.'

Warden Cluck shook his head and got to reading. 'It is the mandate of this court, that you, Russell Lee Holmes, shall be executed for the following crimes.'

He ran down the list. Six counts of murder in the first degree. Kidnapping. Rape. Molestation. All-round sadistic bad ass deserving to die. Russell Lee nodded to each charge. Not a bad list for the kid his mama had simply called Trash, as in 'filthy white trash,' as in, 'no betta than yer father, that piece of no good, filthy white trash.'

'You understand the sentence, Russell Lee?'

The Other Daughter

‘It’s a little late if I don’t.’

‘Fine, then. The Father’s here to meet with you.’

‘I only want to speak with you, my son,’ Father Sanders said soothingly. ‘To be with you in this time of crisis. To allow you to unburden your soul and understand this journey you are about to take.’

Russell Lee, always cordial, said, ‘Fuck you. I don’t want to meet no pussy God. I’m looking forward to meetin’ Mr Satan. I figure I can teach him a thing or two about how to make babies scream. Don’t you got a kid, Warden? A little girl . . .’

The warden’s pudgy face had suddenly turned beet red. He stabbed a thick finger in the air while his jowls started shaking. ‘Don’t start. We’re trying to help you—’

‘Help fry my ass. I’m no fool. You want me dead so you can sleep at night. But I think I’m gonna like being dead. Then I can go anywhere I want, be like Casper. Maybe tonight I’ll find your little girl—’

‘We ain’t gonna bury your body,’ the warden yelled. ‘We’re gonna put it through the chip machine, you son of a bitch. We’re gonna dice you into dust, then dump the dust into acid. Won’t be no trace of your sorry ass left on the face of this earth by the time we’re done with you. No fucking molecule!’

‘Can’t help myself,’ Russell Lee drawled. ‘I was born to be bad.’

Warden Cluck hiked up his gray pants, jerked his head at the priest to join him, and stomped out of the cell.

Russell Lee lay back down on his cot and grinned. Time for a good nap. Nothing more to look forward to today. Nothing more to look forward to period, Trash.

His grin faltered when in the corridor, the four dead men took up the chant.

‘How do you like Russell Lee? Baked, crisped, or fried? How do you like Russell Lee? Baked, crisped, or fried?’

* * *

Three-thirty P.M. Russell Lee got up, his last meal of fried chicken, fried okra, fried sweet potatoes finally arriving. With it came an uninvited guest, reporter Larry Digger – the warden’s way of punishing him for his morning display.

For a moment the two men just stared at each other. Larry Digger was thirty years old, his body trim, his face unlined, his dark hair thick. He carried the wind of the outside world with him like a special scent, and all the men stared at him with sullen, resentful eyes. He breezed into Russell Lee’s cell and plopped down on the cot.

‘You gonna eat all that? You’ll burst your intestines before you ever get to the chair.’

Russell Lee scowled. Larry Digger had been latched on to him like a leech for seven years now, first following his crimes, then his arrest, his trial, and now his death. In the beginning Russell Lee hadn’t minded so much. These days, however, the reporter’s questions made him nervous, maybe a little scared, and Russell Lee *hated* being scared. He fastened his gaze upon the meal cart and inhaled the oily scent of burnt food.

‘Whaddya want?’ Russell Lee demanded, digging into the pile of fried chicken with his hands.

Digger tipped back his fedora and adjusted his trench coat. ‘You seem calm enough. No hysterics, no pledges of innocence.’

‘Nope.’ Russell Lee ripped off a bite of chicken, chewed noisily, swallowed.

‘I was told you’d sworn off the priest. I didn’t think you’d take the Jesus route.’

‘Nope.’

‘No purging of sins for Russell Lee Holmes?’

‘Nope.’

‘Come on, Russell Lee.’ Digger leaned forward and planted his elbows on his knees. ‘You know what I want to hear. It’s

your last day now. You know there won't be a pardon. This is it. Final chance to set the record straight. From your lips to the front page.'

Russell Lee finished the chicken, smacked his greasy lips, and moved on to the charcoaled okra.

'You're gonna die alone, Russell Lee. Maybe that seems okay to you now, but the minute they strap you into Old Sparky, it won't be the same. Give me their names. I can have your wife flown in here for you. And your baby. Give you some support, give you *family* for your last day here on earth.'

Russell Lee finished the okra and plunged three fingers into the middle of the chocolate cake. He collapsed a whole side, excavated it like a tunnel digger, and started sucking the frosting from his palm.

'I'll even pay for it,' Digger said, a last-ditch effort from a man who was paid jack shit, and they both knew it. 'Come on. We know you're married. I've seen the tattoo and I've heard the rumors. Tell me who she is. Tell me about your kid.'

'Why does it matter to you?'

'I'm just trying to help you—'

'You gonna bring 'em here and call 'em freaks, that's what you're gonna do.'

'So they exist, you admit it—'

'Maybe they do. Maybe they don't.' Russell Lee flashed a mouthful of chocolate-coated teeth. 'I ain't telling.'

'You're a stubborn fool, Russell Lee. They are going to fry you, and your wife will never have benefits and your kid will get raised by some other junkyard dog who'll claim it as his own. Probably become a loser just like you.'

'Oh, it's all taken care of, Digger. It is, it is. Matter of fact, I got me more of a future than you do. That's what they call irony, ain't it. Irony. Good word, goddammit. Good word.' Russell Lee turned back to his cake and shut up.

Larry Digger finally left in a rage. Russell Lee tossed his leftover food, including most of the cake, onto the concrete floor. He was supposed to share his dessert with his fellow death row inmates; that was protocol. Russell Lee ground the cake into the cement floor with the heel of his right foot.

‘Let them all share that. Let the motherfuckers share that.’

Abruptly a loud *crunch* rang down the corridor, the noise growing, swelling, into a fierce, angry crescendo. It paused, dipped low, then soared high, going from a whine to a snarl.

The executioner was warming up the chair, testing his equipment at 1800 volts to 500 to 1300 to 300.

Suddenly the moment was very real.

‘How do you like Russell Lee?’ the corridor pulsed. ‘Baked, crisped, or fried? How do you like Russell Lee? Baked, crisped, or fried?’

Russell Lee Holmes sat down quietly on the edge of the cot. He drew in his shoulders, thought of the nastiest things he could think of. Small, soft throats, big blue eyes, shrill little-girl screams.

I won't say a word, baby. I'll keep it to my grave. 'Cause once there was someone who at least pretended to love Trash.

Boston, Massachusetts

Josh Sanders trudged down the brightly lit halls. A first-year resident, he was going on hour thirty-seven of a supposed twenty-four-hour ER shift and he functioned purely on autopilot. He wanted sleep. He must find an empty room. He must sleep.

He came to the door of room five. No lights were on. Dimly he recalled that the boards listed five as unoccupied. Slow night in the ER.

Josh entered the room and yanked back the curtain surrounding the bed, ready to collapse.

A whimper. A hoarse, strangled wheeze. A moan.

The Other Daughter

The freshman doctor caught himself and snapped on the overhead light. A fully clothed little girl lay magically sprawled on top of the bed.

And she was clutching her throat as her eyes rolled back into her head and her whole body went limp.

The death team was well trained. Three guards snapped Russell Lee Holmes into leg irons and a belly chain. He informed the warden he could walk out on his own, and everyone fell into position.

The guards flanked Russell Lee. Warden Cluck led. They marched down the forty-five-foot corridor, where the green door that had greeted 361 men now held Russell Lee's number.

At five the barber had shaved his head, sculpting a perfectly bald crown for the electrode plate. Then there'd been one last shower before he'd donned the execution whites. White pants, white shirt, white belt, all made from cotton grown on the prison farms and cut, spun, and sewed by prison inmates. He was going to his death looking like a fucking painter and without a trace of the outside world upon him.

The door swung open. Old Sparky beckoned. Rich burnished wood, over fifty years old and gleaming. High back, solid arms and legs, wide leather straps. Looked almost like Grandma's favorite rocker except for the face mask and electrodes.

The executioner took over and everything happened in a blur. The guards were strapping Russell Lee to the golden oak frame. One thrust a bite stick between his teeth, the other swabbed his left leg, head, and chest with saline solution to help conduct the electricity. The executioner followed up with metal straps around his calves, metal straps around his wrists, two diodes on each side of his heart, and finally a silver bowl on top of his shaved head. In less than sixty seconds Russell Lee Holmes had been crowned king.

The executioner taped up his eye sockets so there would be less mess when his eyeballs melted, and stuck cotton balls up his nose to limit the bleeding.

Eleven-thirty P.M. The death squad left the room, and Russell Lee's 'torture time' began. He sat, strapped to his death chair, surrounded by blackness and waited for the phone on the wall to ring, the phone connected directly with the governor's office.

In the three viewing rooms across from him, others also waited. In room one were the witnesses – Larry Digger and four relatives of Russell Lee's victims who could afford to attend. Patricia Stokes had lost her four-year-old daughter Meagan to this monster's handiwork. Her husband was on duty at his new job, so she'd brought along her fourteen-year-old son instead. Brian's young face was immobile, but Patricia was sobbing quietly, her thin arms wrapped tightly around her tall, gaunt frame.

In room two, the executioner stood ready. This room contained the second phone connected directly with the governor's office. It also boasted three large buttons, an inch and a half in diameter, which jutted out of the wall. One main inducer and two backups. The state of Texas always got the job done.

Room three was for family and friends of the inmate. Tonight its only occupant was Kelsey Jones, Russell Lee's beleaguered defense attorney, who was wearing his best suit – a mint-colored seersucker – for the occasion. Kelsey Jones had a special assignment. He was to watch. He was to report back, Russell Lee's last consideration to the woman who had loved him.

Then Kelsey Jones was to forget all about Russell Lee – a task he would gladly accept.

Eleven thirty-one P.M. The countdown began, and the many subterfuges and manipulations that had started more than five years before finally came to a head. All rooms were quiet. All occupants were tense.

The Other Daughter

The man who was responsible sat in the chair with tape over his eyeballs and ground his teeth into the bite stick.

I AM POWERFUL. I AM HUGE!

His bowels let loose. And he gripped the end of the armrests so hard his knuckles turned white.

Love you, baby. Love . . . you.

‘Code Blue! Code Blue!’ Josh simultaneously shouted orders and checked the little girl’s pulse. ‘I need a cart, stat! We got a young female, looks to be eight or nine, barely breathing. Somebody call peds!’

Dr Chen rushed into the room. ‘Where did she come from?’

‘Don’t know.’

Staff and crash cart arrived at the same time, and everyone fell into a fast, furious rhythm.

‘She’s not on the boards,’ Nancy, the head nurse reported, grabbing a needle. The IV slipped in, followed by the catheter. Immediately they were drawing blood and urine.

‘She’s running a fever! Oh, we got hives!’ Sherry, another nurse, had finished snipping away the cotton sweatshirt to attach the five-lead heart monitor and revealed the little girl’s inflamed torso.

‘STAND BACK!’

The chest X ray flashed, and they fell back on the patient, working furiously. The girl’s body was covered with a sheen of sweat and she was completely nonresponsive. Then her breathing stopped altogether.

‘Tube!’ Josh shouted, and immediately went to work to intubate.

Shit, she was small. He was afraid he was hurting something as he bumbled his way around her tiny throat like a water buffalo. Then the tube found the opening and slithered down her windpipe. ‘I’m in!’ he exclaimed at the same time Sherry

whirled out of the room with vials of fluid for the CBC, chem 20, and urine drug screen.

‘Pulse is thready,’ Nancy said.

‘Assessment, Josh?’ Dr Chen demanded.

‘Anaphylaxis reaction,’ Josh said immediately. ‘We need one amp of epi.’

‘Point-oh-one milli,’ Dr Chen corrected him. ‘Peds dosage.’

‘I don’t see any sign of a bee sting,’ Nancy reported, handing over the epinephrine and watching the doctor administer it through the breathing tube.

‘It could be a reaction to anything,’ Dr Chen murmured, and waited to see what the epi would do.

For a moment they were all still.

The little girl looked so unprotected sprawled on the white hospital bed with five wires, an IV, and a bulky breathing tube sprouting from her small figure. Long blond hair spilled onto the bed and smelled faintly of No More Tears baby shampoo. Her eyelashes were thick and her face splotchy – smudges under the eyes, bright red spots staining her plump cheeks. No matter how many years he worked, Josh would never get used to the sight of a child in a hospital.

‘Muscles are relaxing,’ Josh reported. ‘Breathing’s easier.’ Epinephrine acted fast. The little girl’s eyes fluttered open but didn’t focus.

‘Hello?’ Dr Chen tried. ‘Can you hear me?’

No response. He moved from verbal to tactile, shaking her lightly. She still did not respond. Nancy tried the sternal rub, pressing her knuckles against the tiny sternum hard enough to induce pain. The little girl’s body arched helplessly, but her eyes remained glazed.

‘Hard to arouse,’ Nancy reported. ‘The patient remains nonresponsive.’ Now they were all frowning.

The door burst open.

The Other Daughter

‘What’s all the ruckus about?’ Dr Harper Stokes strode into the room, wearing green scrubs as if they were tennis whites and looking almost unreal with his deep tan, vivid blue eyes, and movie-poster face. He had just joined City General Hospital as a hotshot cardiothoracic surgeon and had already taken to striding the halls like Jesus in search of lepers. Josh had heard he was very good but also seemed to know it. You know what the difference between a cardiac surgeon and God is? God doesn’t think he’s a cardiac surgeon.

‘We got it,’ Dr Chen said a bit testily.

‘Uh-huh.’ Dr Harper sauntered over to the bed. Then he spotted the little girl sprouting tubes and drew up cold, looking honestly shocked. ‘My God, what *happened?*’

‘Anaphylaxis reaction to unknown agent.’

‘Epi?’

‘Of course.’

‘Give me the chest X ray.’ Dr Stokes held out a hand, peering at the girl intently and checking her heartbeat.

‘We got it under control!’

Dr Stokes raised his head just long enough to look the younger MD in the eye. ‘Then, why, Dr Chen,’ he said somberly, ‘is she lying there like a rag doll?’

Dr Chen gritted his teeth. ‘I don’t know.’

Midnight. The doctor entered the executioner’s room and took up position against the back wall, his hands clasped behind him. The executioner picked up the phone connected to the governor’s office.

He heard dial tone.

He recradled the receiver. He counted off sixty seconds.

He stared at Russell Lee Holmes, who sat in the middle of the death chamber with his lips peeled back from his scarecrow teeth in an idiot’s grin.

‘He’s too dumb to know what’s going on,’ the doctor said.

‘Don’t matter now,’ the executioner said.

His watch hit 12:01. He picked up the phone. He still heard the dial tone.

He hit the main inducer button and 440 volts/10 ohms of electricity surged through Russell Lee Holmes’s body.

The lights dimmed in the Death House. Three inmates roared and clapped while one curled beneath his cot and rocked back and forth like a frightened child. The relatives of the victims watched stoically at first, but when Russell Lee’s skin turned bright red and began to smoke, they turned away. Except for Brian Stokes. He remained watching, as if transfixed, while Russell Lee Holmes’s body convulsed. Abruptly his feet blew off. Then his hands. Behind Brian, his mother screamed. He still didn’t look away.

And then it was simply over.

The doctor entered the death chamber. He’d wiped Vicks VapoRub beneath his nose to block out the smell. It wasn’t enough, and his nose crinkled as he inspected the body.

He looked at the middle window, into the executioner’s room. ‘Time of death is twelve-oh-five.’

‘I got drug screen results!’ Sherry plowed through the door, and Josh grabbed the reports, just beating out Dr Harper Stokes.

‘She’s positive for opiates,’ Josh called.

‘Morphine,’ Dr Stokes said.

‘Narcan,’ Dr Chen ordered. ‘Point-oh-oh-five milli per kilo. Bring extra!’

Sherry rushed away for the reversing agent.

‘Could she be allergic to morphine?’ Josh quizzed Dr Chen. ‘Could that be what caused the anaphylaxis reaction?’

‘It happens.’

Sherry returned with the narcan and Dr Chen quickly injected

it. They removed the breathing tube and waited, a second dose already in hand. Narcan could be repeated every two to three minutes if necessary. Dr Stokes checked the young girl's pulse again, then her heart.

'Better,' he announced. 'Steadying. Oh, hang on. Here we go . . .'

The little girl was moving her head from side to side. Nancy drew a sheet over her and they all held their breath. The little girl blinked and her large eyes, a striking mix of blue and gray, focused.

'Can you hear me, honey?' Dr Stokes whispered, his voice curiously thick as he smoothed back her limp hair from her sweaty forehead. 'Can you tell us your name?'

She didn't answer. She took in the strangers hovering above her, the white, white room, the lines and wires sticking out of her body. Plump and awkward-looking, she was not a pretty child, Josh thought, but at that moment she was completely endearing. He took her hand and her gaze rested on him immediately, tearing him up a little. Who in hell drugged and abandoned a little girl? The world was sick.

After a moment her fingers gripped his. A nice, strong grip considering her condition.

'It's okay,' he whispered. 'You're safe. Tell us your name, honey. We need to know your name.'

Her mouth opened, her parched throat working, but no sound emerged. She looked a little more panicked.

'Relax,' he soothed. 'Take a deep breath. Everything is okay. Everything is fine. Now try it again.'

She looked at him trustingly.

This time she whispered, 'Daddy's Girl.'